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Witnessing awareness and modes of cognitive awareness

A terminology proposal for the psychological assessment of witnessing and (meta)cognitive experiences.

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Introducing a new terminological framework for the psychological assessment of witnessing awareness experiences, based on a rational perspective and the first person reports of both Eastern and Western practitioners.

I am, the ability that has no operational definition

The witnessing awareness experience is a type of subjective experience that is been described in most of the religious and spiritual traditions as a non-dual experience, beyond the mind and the self, without any possibility to use more than two words to describe it: I am. The actual paradigm in religious thinking describes this experience only in terms of what is not: it is not the mind, not the attention, not the emotions. Though we do not have a scientific consensus on the words that describe this experience, we do use some kind of technical terminology pointing to it: mystical experience, spiritual enlightenment, awakening, spiritual revelation, transpersonal state.

The border between mysticism and psychopathology is a sensitive line for the psychiatry of the western world. A psychiatric report on mysticism in US, published in 1976, states that mystical phenomena may be of interest because “they can demonstrate forms of behaviour intermediate between normality and frank psychosis; a form of ego regression in the service of defense against internal or external stress; and a paradox of the return of repressed regression in unconventional expressions of love”². A radical change happened in 1994, when a group of researchers introduced a new diagnostic category in The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association, fourth edition, which refers to Religious or Spiritual Problem. Since then, the expansion of the consciousness science clarified many of the dilemmas coming from spiritual experiences and the eastern practices.

I am exploring here the witnessing awareness experience from the perspective of psychological assessment and the psychology of personality, considering witnessing awareness as a mode of functioning. I explore the witnessing awareness experience without

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² Committee on Psychiatry and Religion of the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry. (1976). *Mysticism: Spiritual Quest or Psychic Disorder?* Vol. 9, Publication 97. New York: The Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, p. 731

using concepts such as spiritual, spirit, psychosis, enlightenment, transpersonal, and keep these words as descriptions of the experience, not as explanations, as they have too much emotional content that it may bias our understanding.

My perspective is based on first person reports, and my assumption is that all the experiences people have are real for them, but the interpretations may be delusional. Another issue is that exploring the witnessing awareness experiences through self-reports has an important gap: how can a first person report refer to a formless non-experience, when an experience such as witnessing awareness is described?

I think this gap needs to be removed from our scientific paradigm. The idea that there are no words for a witnessing awareness experience, to me it means that there are no words now. I think it is time to abandon the perspective that we cannot explain what a witnessing experience is. Two thousand years ago they did not have the full suite of scientific terminology to explain it. We may have this terminology nowadays. In addition, we can invent new concepts if needed, so that we would not be forced to explain a natural phenomena related to consciousness using a two thousand years old terminology.

Witnessing awareness mode: a natural dynamics of the psyche

An important characteristic of awareness is the ability to be reflective of itself. At the age of two-three, the children get a new feature: self-awareness. At this age, their identity is formed and they are able to differentiate between themselves and the environment. They are now able to use the first person perspective.

After self-awareness appears in childhood, there is an entire range of new aspects of consciousness that are available to the newly formed self: emotions, perceptions, thinking and self-reflection, night dreaming, trance states, day dreaming, getting drunk and losing self-consciousness, orgasm, getting high, joy and a variety of religious experiences.

Next development of psyche is the witnessing experience: the ability to look at your own body, thoughts, feelings and your own awareness as a neutral witness, from outside, and then to somehow feel a witnessing awareness. We have the experience of an I, of an Observer, watching ourselves doing things. This is the starting point of a kind of experience people describe as awakening. The brain starts to function differently. Then, some of us, I suspect a vast majority, develop the experience of conscious witnessing: they witness the I, the attention beam itself and the I as object of attention: aware of awareness, in perfect flow of conscious awareness, pointed toward itself. The pure conscious experience of I am. I am something that is neither my ego, nor the observer. It is described as a process of pure being, through the words *I am*.

This experience is covered in mystical terminology. What people report after this state is an interconnectedness between all there is, between the I and the other human beings, and all the other life forms and nature around you, with a strong emotions of bliss accompanying the experience. These events are reported frequently using the concept of spiritual enlightenment.

After this first *I am* experience, one become gradually capable of re-living the experience, and to increase its intensity and clarity, until it habitualizes and become permanent. Yoga Sutra describe this as a range of experiences, that starts in *savikalpa samadhi* and ends in *nirvikalpa samadhi*, and then into *Sahaja*. The Buddhists describe this process in terms of *Jhana*. However, is this witnessing awareness mode the end of human evolution? Is that all? Having a permanent witnessing awareness that is experienced as one, as both inside and outside, is that the end of the journey?

My assumption is that the experience of witnessing awareness is not changing the patterns of the mind just like that. Becoming a more conscious human being is a choice and the witnessing awareness gives the individual the freedom to be conscious and perceive parts of reality that were hidden. After experiencing the witnessing mode, the long road of balancing the unconscious patterns begin. Though many reports describe that the ego dissolves, I would advance the idea that even while witnessing awareness is sustained, there is an automatic organization and integration of habitual patterns related to the mind. If the automatic patterns are balanced, the resulting actions will be balanced.

The witnessing awareness mode and the cognitive consciousness mode

My terminological proposal separates the two experiences: the Witnessing awareness experience (witnessing awareness mode), and the Self experiences (cognitive consciousness mode), related to cognitive processing.

Three concepts are mostly important in describing the witnessing awareness mode: attention, awareness and consciousness:

- *Awareness* is "the background radar of consciousness, continually monitoring the inner and outer environment. One may be aware of stimuli without them being at the center of attention".³

- *Attention* is "a process of focusing conscious awareness, providing heightened sensitivity to a limited range of experience"⁴ There are two types of attention that are important for witnessing experience, described in meditation texts: concentrative and receptive attention. *Concentrative attention* is a narrow and intense focus of attention on a single point. *Receptive attention*, related to mindfulness practices, is a non-reactive monitoring of the content of experience from moment to moment⁵. This diffused wide range and non-focused attention is monitoring the inner and outer environments for relevance. When it notices something relevant it handshakes with our focused attention, which then isolates and narrows down the range of attention and perception to what is noticed, mostly a particular object⁶.

- *Consciousness experience* encompasses awareness, attention and the cognitive representation of the object or objects perceived. The process of concentrating/focusing and receptively diffusing attention, provides heightened sensitivity to both a limited and large range of experience.

But who is watching the show? The following distinction is reported: the experience of the Seer can have two modes. One mode is the I (Real Self), experienced in the witnessing awareness mode, and the other one is the Self (ego), experienced in the cognitive consciousness mode. When the Seer is in the Self (ego) mode, there is also a kind of observing experience available, as a third party observer. When the witnessing awareness mode appears, the ego disappears and the Seer is seen as an I devoided of its cognitive attributes.

I presume there is still a kind of homeostatic organization of the mind patterns during this mode, but the individual just lets the mind flow naturally, based on its own patterns (not

³ Brown K. B., Ryan R., M. (2003). The Benefits of Being Present: Mindfulness and its Role in Psychological Well-Being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 84, No. 4, 822–848

⁴ idem

⁵ Koutstaal, W. (2012). *The Agile Mind*. New York: Oxford University Press

⁶ Thanks to Carlo Monsanto for this terminological clarification

necessarily balanced). The witnessing awareness mode may be the background awareness that is active during the deep sleep state, so accepting the reports of some people being aware and having a kind of mentation while in delta sleep.

Attention is a very important element in the witnessing awareness mode. In Buddhism, mindfulness practice is based on receptive attention. Carlo Monsanto⁷ describes the differences between concentrative / receptive attention:

“The witness doesn't put anything into and doesn't take anything out of experience. It is through attention that this witness or conscious awareness relates to experience. And when the witness channels through the brain, attention is either concentrative (left-brained) or receptive or stimulus-driven (right-brained).

So, attention either perceives 1) just one object, while filtering out everything else or 2) it is receptive to perceive the interconnected reality - the collective. And the witness is the meta-position that organizes these streams of activity through the brain.

Hence we can experience a state wherein we identify with separate objects (concentrative / duality), or experience an interconnected reality (receptive / duality) or are the witness (meta / non duality) that integrates all of the previous states. We are capable as a witness of being fully present in the brain's activity, that works on the basis of concentrative and receptive attention, during any human activity. At this time we are completely free and live in the world but are not of the world. This is accessible to any willing person”⁸

In Table 1, I organized some descriptors of the subjective experience in the Witnessing Awareness mode vs. Cognitive Consciousness mode.

Table 1

Witnessing Awareness Mode	Cognitive Consciousness mode
A zero reference for mental activity Witnessing	A spectrum of mental activity Observing, identifying
Real Self, Witnessing Self – “I” I am	(Observing) Self – ego I am me
Meta consciousness	Cognitive consciousness
Stable Witnessing awareness I, witness patterns, choose or accept mental patterns Witness mind and personality	Dynamic mental awareness Self, Experience of patterns of thinking and feeling Self-Actualization, Individuation
Witness feelings and sensations De-automation, paying attention to present moments	Observer – First-Person Cognition, thinking. Personality traits
One mode of pure awareness, access to any part of the mind (no subconscious)	Aware of external/internal stimuli, Feeling, Sensing Automatic behavior and cognitive patterns Consciousness, conscious and unconscious content and processing
Witnessing experience, Aware of awareness itself Pre-reflective state Jamais vu	Déjà vu
Knowing by contemplation (still need the mind to	Knowing by thinking, feeling, sensing

⁷ Carlo Monsanto is the director of the Aradne Institute, <http://www.aradneinstitute.org/>

⁸ Personal communication, April 25, 2013

Witnessing Awareness Mode	Cognitive Consciousness mode
interpret)	
Allows increased perceptual processing and unconscious processing (faster)	Cognitive processing
Supported by receptive attention (attend diffusely to a whole field)	Conscious and controlled processing Supported by concentrative attention
Just being	Imagining a need for enlightenment
Direct experience through awareness, independent of ASC (e.g. natural connection with the environment)	Altered states of consciousness (ASC) (e.g. expanded consciousness)
Just watching. Voluntary control over thoughts and ego.	Mystical experiences. People report a disconnect from thought processes and ego
No repressed ideas in unconscious, letting go of any emotions and thoughts, good or bad	Unconscious formed of repressed negative ideas, emotions
No desire to control, relaxed decision making	Control of thinking and emotions
Accepting all emotions	Selecting good emotions
Feeling on interconnectedness with all life forms	Feeling of separation, ego
Universal love	Love for close friends
Process of transformation through increased acceptance of life	Process of transformation through higher order thoughts (higher level of abstractization)
Felt as real freedom (I am as free as I can be)	the idea of freedom
Know all the states	Remember the states, state dependent memory
Pure awareness	Flow Consciousness
Here-Now Experience	Wandering in thinking
Observing surroundings, Perceptual visual data	Switching modes: surroundings/thinking
Experiential therapies and techniques	Self –image rational psychotherapies

In the witnessing experience, “the subject is witnessing as it presents from a psycho-physical (hence spatiotemporal) perspective”⁹. From a philosophical point of view, witnessing “is modality-neutral... it is not tied to a particular mode of cognition, and it has its own phenomenal character... there is something it is like simply to be aware”.¹⁰

The witnessing awareness mode is described by the first person reports as a constant fresh look into the present moment, as a new *zeroth-person* perspective, from where there is no such thing as a flow of consciousness, there is only a present-centered experience. This type of first-person description is embraced by some consciousness scientists, who support the idea that there is no stream of consciousness after all, because there is no need to store any data. The experience is new again, only a part of it that is required for further exploration is remembered. Susan Blackmore supports the idea that there is no need for internal representations at all because the world is the external memory. But is this a valid explanation for the mind and thinking experiences?

⁹ Albahari, M. (2009). Witness consciousness: its definition, appearance, and reality. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 16(1): 62–84.

¹⁰ Aaron Henry & Evan Thompson (2011). Witnessing from Here: Self-Awareness from a Bodily versus Embodied Perspective. In Shaun Gallagher (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press

“conscious visual experiences are generated not by building representations but by mastering sensorimotor contingencies. What remains between saccades is not a picture of the world, but the information needed for further exploration. A study by Karn and Hayhoe (2000) confirms that spatial information required to control eye movements is retained across saccades. This kind of theory is dramatically different from existing theories of perception. It entails no representation of the world at all”¹¹.

A particular dynamics of these two modes of functioning is described by the term *pure conscious event* (PCE). Supported by Robert Forman¹², PCEs are critically approached by a number of authors who have questioned both the very existence of PCEs and their universality¹³. I support the idea that the framework of the mystical experiences is fundamentally the same all over the world, and we can find its common traits using psychological assessment methodology and looking at archetypal levels, using dreamwork psychology methodology.

Activating the witnessing awareness mode: the journey that is not necessary

The milestones of the transformational journey to the deeper parts of the Self are presented in a very simple but technical way in *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali, when he describes the path to Samadhi, and then through different stages of Samadhi, until the final realization is obtained and habitualized.

But, there is no need to sit in meditation to achieve the witnessing awareness mode. It is exactly the opposite. Your mind is imagining that you need a journey, but in fact you don't. Witnessing is not a process, but a conscious choice. Starting the witnessing awareness mode may be a serendipity event or a guided result, with simple instructions: paying attention to the present moment and letting go of your mind. Many of the simple techniques are provided by the teachers of Advaita and other non-dual movements.

I think most of us have at least once in our childhood the experience generated by the witnessing awareness mode, but we forgot the experience. A glimpse of the witnessing awareness mode is sometimes activated when we are in love, while the Ego barriers are temporary down. In a technical reductionism, I would describe the emergence of the witnessing awareness mode in the following steps:

Naturally occurrence

The witnessing experience appears naturally during life, then it is forgotten

Openness to new patterns

Usually due to some significant moment (trauma in most of the cases, including ascetic and religious practices) the mind become free gradually, the ego opens, the mind is free to think new ideas, new emotions manifest, usually with a kind of a third person perspective, the spectator.

¹¹ Blackmore, S. *There is no stream of consciousness*. Retrieved May, 26, from <http://www.susanblackmore.co.uk/Articles/jcs02.htm>

¹² Forman, R.K.C. (Ed.), (1990). *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹³ Rocco J. Gennaro (2008). Are There Pure Conscious Events? In Chandana Chakrabarti & Gordon Haist (eds.), *Revisiting Mysticism* (pp.100-120). Cambridge Scholars Press

First full experience of witnessing awareness, first pure conscious event

First experience of I am, the witnessing experience with the mind one-pointed to the I, with duration of some minutes-hours-days. This is not necessarily happening while meditating.

Archetypal freedom of mind, witnessing awareness mode is active most of the time

The mind gradually begins to let go, reaching the archetypal levels. The Jungian-Senoi dreamwork psychology refers to the following archetypes of the collective mind: masculine, feminine, adversity, heroic, journey, death/rebirth, Self, wise old man, mother. There is a constant switch between the witnessing awareness mode and the cognitive mode, between witnessing experience and self experience.

Through witnessing, the individual is able to reorganize the emotional and cognitive patterns; during the witnessing mode the person reports they have the ability to consciously avoid old patterns and start new ones. In this stage, the ego is losing its power, and the defense mechanisms may appear to protect the ego.

Sustained witnessing experience, balanced mind patterns

"Before Enlightenment chop wood carry water, after Enlightenment, chop wood carry water". "When hungry eat, when tired sleep" (Zen proverbs). The patterns of the mind-body-emotions remain active, but balanced. This is when the witnessing awareness mode is always on, and the mind is free of all the unconscious patterns that caused unbalancing.

After the first occurrence of the witnessing awareness mode, witnessing become more present, for some minutes a month, or for some days a year. Sustaining conscious awareness, which includes witnessing, takes time, as any other new capacity¹⁴. And it is not a certain fact that having the witnessing experience once will lead to its habitualization. Ramana Maharishi describes the process of cleaning the patterns of the mind as following:

"Q: Should all vasanas, (memory imprints, patterns) be completely overcome before Self Realization takes place, or some may remain for Self Realization to destroy?"

*Ramana: Vasanas which do not obstruct Self Realization remain. In Yoga Vasishtha, two classes of vasanas are distinguished: those of enjoyment, those of bondage. The enjoyment vasanas remain ever after Mukti (Freedom) is attained, but the bondage vasanas are destroyed by it. Attachment is the cause of binding vasanas, but enjoyment without attachment does not bind and continue even in Sahaja."*¹⁵

During the witnessing awareness mode, the individuals report a feeling of being in present moment, they experience a present-centered attention and the life as a flow. Being here-now seems to be a very rich experience. The flow of present moment is continuous, and this creates a sense of interconnectedness with all life forms. Some people may experience strong positive emotions during these states. After habitualization of the witnessing experience, these strong emotions appear from time to time only. The buddhist monk Smritiratna, speaks about bliss and rapture, in an interview by Jeff Warren:

¹⁴ Deikman, Arthur J. "De-automatization and the Mystic Experience." *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes* (1966).

¹⁵ Savikalpa and Nirvikalpa Samadhi (January 27, 2009). Retrieved May 26, 2013, from <http://www.arunachala-ramana.org/forum/index.php?topic=2430.0>

“This happens when an object becomes an aesthetic object for you, when it feels like the most beautiful thing—you’re delighted, fascinated. You have a strong emotional interest, like being in love. You pass a threshold where experience becomes so beautiful that there is nothing else you would rather be doing. Everything else fades away, even pain if you’re sitting uncomfortably. A lot of meditators get this. The object of your devotion can be anything—a vase, a piece of music. Once I was climbing up a hill and I entered an alpine garden of mosses and rock flowers and I got down on my knees and just gazed in wonderment.” He stopped, a bit embarrassed. “This is a kind of bliss.”

“So how often does that happen for you?”

“It’s hard to say because it’s all a matter of degree. Maybe once a week or so.

It began many years ago. I would be meditating and once in a while I would feel joy and delight, at being so totally engaged in the one thing. It was a kind of concentration where all energies—emotional, physical, intellectual—are centered upon one thing. This is what is described in the jhanas. Bliss and rapture followed by one-pointedness and sustained attention”.

An unusual testimony comes from Dalai Lama, talking about the essence of Buddhism in an interview published in Rolling Stone Magazine

“When people think it's all about doing tantric visualizations and rituals. When I talk about the Buddhist dharma, I'm not talking about just chanting and rituals. If it's thought to be a philosophy, it's not that, either. The dharma, it's just the mind. I'm afraid that among the Tibetans, the Chinese and also some Westerners -- the new Buddhists -- in many cases they consider the practice of Buddhism is simply to recite something and perform some ritual, putting false expectations on the esoteric magic of tantra: 'Oh, if I do this, I may get something amazing!' So they neglect the basic instruments that actually transform our mind. These instruments are the altruistic spirit of enlightenment [bodhicitta], the transcendent attitude, renunciation, the realization of impermanence, the wisdom of selflessness. People who think they have a magic gimmick neglect these things. So their inner world, their inner reality, remains very raw. Sadly, use of ritual can feed that neglect. Knowledge of philosophy can also feed that. It's a great tragedy.”¹⁶

Activating the witnessing awareness mode: spiritual path, side-effects and rational thinking

Some mystical experiences and altered states of consciousness are related to cognitive consciousness mode, and not to witnessing. The mystical experience many times is disconnected from the reality we live in. Techniques such as meditation are many times focused on individual, and doesn’t create a sense of interconnectedness, but separateness, creating a sense of alienation in the individual.

A permanent rational thinking is necessary during the habitualization process; otherwise, the patterns of the mind are hard to change. An additional characteristic is that sustaining witnessing awareness produces an increased sense of interconnectedness. The first person reports are always including descriptions such as: we are one, we are all connected, I am God,

¹⁶ Thurman, R. (2001, May). The Rolling Stone Interview: The Dalai Lama, *Rolling Stone Magazine*

we are God. Ego issues during the journey are a part of the problems that appear. During these stages, the person lives their life at cosmic proportions, in a very profound way.

This is how Smritiratna describes his experience:¹⁷

“Q: “Do you experience the jhanas like they say in the *Visuddhimagga*? Does that happen?” ...

Smritiratna: “Sometimes I’m very absorbed in the experience, other times I’m trapped in one of the hindrances, in my own distracting thoughts.”

“You mean that still happens even after twenty years?”

“Of course!”

“Well, I mean, what about the weird visions and all that? Those seem like some pretty crazy special effects.”

“I’ve never had any out-of-body experiences, if that’s what you’re asking. Or seen the strange colors and landscapes that some people report. Several times in my early years I felt my body expanding outward, to fill the whole room. At the time I thought, ‘Wow, now we’re really getting somewhere.’ But this no longer happens very often, and I no longer think it’s important. In Buddhism we call these effects ‘samapatti’—unusual or extraordinary experiences. That’s simply telling you that meditation is having an effect. It has no extra meaning with regard to your meditation progress.”

After the activation of the witnessing awareness mode, the unconscious mind reveals itself. The last remains of the unconscious are the archetypes, that need to be balanced. There is no such thing as a perfect human being with no mind, unless the brain is damaged. There are humans that have a permanent witnessing awareness experience, but the patterns of the mind are still there in their archetypal forms, and needs balancing. So, don’t call off the search if you have experienced the witnessing awareness experience, as some neo-Advaita masters advise¹⁸. There is still a lot to work with the patterns of the mind.

There is an increased risk for individuals that activate the witnessing experience and at that moment they don’t have a balanced mind, to think for a period of time that they have been selected for special missions in their lives. While activating the witnessing awareness mode, the mind becomes gradually free, and during this process the information that has been repressed within the unconscious is being accepted and integrated. This process of reorganization is sometimes described as a *spiritual emergency* or *psychospiritual crisis*.

In 1980, Christina and Stanislav Grof founded the Spiritual Emergency Network, an organization that connects individuals undergoing psychospiritual crises with professionals, who are able and willing to provide assistance based on the new understanding of these states.

The spiritual crises related to awakening can now be correctly identified also by psychiatrists, thanks to a group of researchers, which introduced a new diagnostic category in DSM-IV, “The Religious or Spiritual Problem”. For the first time, there is acknowledgment of distressing religious and spiritual experiences as non-pathological problems¹⁹.

Depending on the psychology of the individuals, the information rising from the unconsciousness is blocking the rational function for a period of time, thus leading to some unusual interpretations of reality. The main types of spiritual emergence are shamanic crisis, awakening of kundalini, episodes of unitive consciousness, psychological renewal through

¹⁷ Warren, J. (2007). *The head trip: Adventures on the wheel of consciousness*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, p. 305.

¹⁸ Conway, T (March 1, 2008). *Neo-Advaita or Pseudo-Advaita and Real Advaita-Nonduality*. Retrieved May 20, 2013, from <http://www.enlightened-spirituality.org/neo-advaita.html>

¹⁹ Lukoff, D., Lu, F., & Turner, R. (1998). From spiritual emergency to spiritual problem: The transpersonal roots of the new DSM-IV Category. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 38(2), 21-50.

return to the center, crisis of psychic opening, past-life experiences, communication with spirit guides and "channeling", near-death experiences, close encounters with UFOs and alien abduction experiences, possession states, alcoholism and drug addiction.²⁰

James Kent, a researcher of mystical experiences induced by DMT²¹ explains how the patterns of the visual imagery during DMT-induced states are in fact based on fractal patterns. In the introduction to his book *Psychedelic Information Theory. Shamanism in the Age of Reason*, he writes: "the book is a formal deconstruction of psychedelic hallucination, expanded consciousness, and shamanism, and as such it attempts to move topics which have traditionally been classified as metaphysics into fields of physics and mathematics."²² He presents arguments that the aliens or angels people see during DMT states are nothing more than their own imagery, based on physiology. In a comment on *Sex, Drugs, Einstein, & Elves*²³ he writes:

*"I think in general people like to romanticize the DMT state and make it more than it is because they desperately want there to be a hidden hyperspatial world filled with mischievous sprites and god-like entities. However, when one closely studies the experience over and over again over time you come to see that a lot of the romanticized notions are not what is actually happening in the state, and people tend to "editorialize" the content of the experience in hindsight in order to make it into something more than what it actually is."*²⁴

The journey that leads to activation witnessing experience is a hard one nowadays, although knowledge is available. The abundance of pseudoscience and spiritual entertainment proposals make the journey difficult and simple things that can be said in one minute are covered in great books and great talks that require week or months for understanding them. There is a cognitive temptation that looks to attract people to supernatural stories of reality. Susan Blackmore, one of the scientists from the consciousness research, describes her personal scientific efforts to check if a presumable psychic field can be accessed by humans:

I believed that all minds were connected through a psychic field and that memory was a special case of telepathy. So I set to work on a long series of experiments comparing ESP and memory. The results were a shock. Whether I looked for telepathy or precognition or clairvoyance, I got only chance results. I trained fellow students in imagery; chance results. I tested twins in pairs; chance results. I worked in play groups with very young children; chance results. I trained as a Tarot reader; chance results. Occasionally I got a significant result. Oh the excitement! Then as a scientist must I repeated the experiment, checked for errors, redid the statistics, and varied the conditions, and every time either I found the error or got chance results again".²⁵

²⁰ Grof, S. (2009). *Spiritual Emergencies: Understanding and Treatment of Psychospiritual Crises*. Retrieved May 20, 2013, from http://www.realitysandwich.com/spiritual_emergencies

²¹ DMT is the primary psychoactive compound in ayahuasca, used by indigenous Amazonian Amerindian cultures for divinatory and healing purposes

²² Kent, J. (2010). *Psychedelic Information Theory. Shamanism in the Age of Reason*. Seattle: PIT Press

²³ Clifford A. P. (2005). *Sex, Drugs, Einstein, & Elves*. Petaluma: Smart Publications

²⁴ Kent, J. (2004). *DMT Elves* [Online Forum Comment]. Retrieved May 10, 2013, from <http://sprott.physics.wisc.edu/pickover/pc/dmt.html>

²⁵ Blackmore, S. (2010) Why I had to change my mind. In Gross R. *Psychology: The Science of Mind and Behaviour*. London: Hodder Education

Yet, the never-ending debate scientists vs. spiritual practicants may not be ending soon. The practicants report that they feel an interconnectedness, but scientists disagree, and holistic health or parapsychology failed to pass the James Randi' simple test.

Psychological assessment of the witnessing awareness and cognitive consciousness experiences.

There is an increased tendency to use philosophy and neuroscience to explain consciousness, and leave depth psychology aside. In *The view from within. The first person approaches to the study of consciousness* (Varela and Shear, 1999), Bernard Baars felt the need to emphasize this, writing a chapter called *There is already a field of systematic phenomenology, and it's called "Psychology"*.

*"I have great respect for efforts by Francisco Varela, Jonathan Shear and company to create a systematic phenomenology. In support of their efforts it should be noted that there is no need to start from scratch. We already have a systematic study of human conscious experience, and it is called 'psychology'. True, many academic psychologists deny this rather obvious fact, but if we look at what they do rather than what they say, we find that they are always studying the things people can report with accuracy. But the things we humans can report accurately are the same things we experience as conscious! Reportability is the generally accepted index of consciousness. In point of fact, therefore, psychologists are always asking people about their conscious experiences"*²⁶

Witnessing awareness mode is in my opinion one of the key features of the so-called spiritual awakening. I do not know if the spiritual enlightenment is the same process as the activation of the witnessing awareness mode. But I support the idea that self-reports and interviews with people who experience witnessing awareness can provide quantitative relevant data, if we can manage create a very good operational definition of the witnessing awareness mode. Still, the methodological issue, rose by Varela and Shear in *A View from Within*, that the researchers need an important knowledge of the consciousness experience themselves, remains valid.

Another issue is that the analysis of the witnessing awareness experiences using the first person reports is limited by the relevance of the reports: the phenomenon of *idealization* may appear in reports of witnessing experiences²⁷.

In the last years, there is an increasing number of available self-reports regarding witnessing experiences and mystical states among practitioners who do not belong to any particular spiritual or religious movement. Today, in a quick google search with the exact phrase *my enlightenment experience* I found 117 first-person reports. The internet looks like a blessing for researchers of subjective experiences. We just put the questionnaire online, and send the invitations. Through online assessment, we could obtain valuable scientific data from the first person reports, as we no longer need to use convenience sampling when researching

²⁶ Baars, B.J. (1999). There is already a field of systematic phenomenology, and it's called 'psychology'. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6(2-3), 216-218, also in Varela, F.J. and Shear, J. (Eds) (1999). *The View From Within*. Thorverton, Devon: Imprint Academic, 216-218

²⁷ Mysticism [Def. 1]. In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved May 01, 2013, from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism/>

witnessing awareness states. This would therefore allow us to start to use statistics and eliminate the geographical and religious biases in the first person reports.

Some of these reports describe the emergence of the *witnessing experience* and the *illusion of Self*. Described by Advaita and Yoga long ago, the range of experiences derived from this have different names including pure consciousness, pure awareness, contentless consciousness, formless consciousness, non-dual mystical states, unity consciousness, conscious awareness event. The scientific literature is also abundant, thanks to the efforts of the consciousness researchers.²⁸

In psychology, measuring the consciousness experience with assessment instruments and statistical methods has been a rare topic of research, maybe because psychologists find it difficult to create a method that would reach a satisfactory level of significance of the results.

Since 2002, I tried to figure out a way to do this with the general concept of consciousness²⁹. The effort to introduce consciousness as a research variable in psychological assessment took me from ecstasy to despair, until I finally found valid measurement procedure, and so the Consciousness Quotient Inventory (CQ-i) was born, after 14 studies on 6,800 individuals.³⁰ I have defined the Consciousness Quotient as the level of consciousness (or the level of being conscious or aware) that is experienced in the morning, one hour after waking up and after having a refreshing sleep, without being exposed to any significant stimulus (coffee, TV, radio, music, talking, psychological stress). In other words, the consciousness quotient is the general level of being conscious/aware throughout a day, in regular life conditions. Of course, this level of being conscious can change through personal development efforts.

CQ-i is not measuring consciousness directly, but through inference from behaviours and applied life principles, using statistical analysis. The inventory is evaluating the frequency of the behaviours and the usage of life principles that are indicators for conscious awareness experiences. Around one third of the conscious/aware behaviours described have not been found in scientific literature, but were included in the inventory as valuable experiential data from the eastern wisdom of consciousness. I purposely avoided including in CQ-i any aspects related to altered states of consciousness, as I was interested in measuring the general level of being conscious, after a peak experience (such as a pure consciousness event) fades away.

Researchers of the witnessing experience may use various tools to explore the subjective experience. In *Ten Years of Viewing from Within: The Legacy of Francisco Varela*, a collection of papers edited by Claire Petitmengin³¹, authors describe some second-person methods that are suitable for researching witnessing experience: “Descriptive Experience Sampling” (DES) method by Russ Hurlburt and colleagues, and the “Explicitation Interview” (EI) by Pierre Vermersch and colleagues³².

²⁸ Online paper on consciousness, a list compiled by David Chalmers and David Bourget, available at <http://consc.net/online>

²⁹ The Consciousness Quotient: introducing the consciousness experience as a research variable in psychological assessment (March 13, 2013). Retrieved May 10, 2013, from <http://www.consciousness-quotient.com/the-consciousness-quotient-introducing-the-consciousness-experience-as-a-research-variable-in-psychological-assessment/>

³⁰ Brazdau, O. (2011). CQ: *Coeficientul de constientizare. The Consciousness Quotient (CQ) & The CQ Inventory – Theory and Research*. Bucharest: Info-Sanatate Press.

³¹ Petitmengin C (ed) (2009) *Ten years of viewing from within: The legacy of Francisco Varela*. Imprint Academic, Exeter.

³² Froese, T., Gould, C., & Barrett, A. (2011). Re-viewing from within: A commentary on first-and second-person methods in the science of consciousness. *Constructivist Foundations*, 6(2), 254-269.

Nevertheless, how do we measure a buddhist monk, such as Smritiranta³³, who looks to be an *arhat*, and to experience a permanent witnessing awareness? We may measure his mindfulness, his openness, but the witnessing experience is a new feature we need to take into account.

Three intriguing questions and hypotheses

The terminological distinction between witnessing awareness mode and the cognitive consciousness mode is leading to some new hypotheses in consciousness research. Here there are some intriguing research questions and perspectives:

#1 Microtubules, Orch-Or and the speed of processing

Witnessing awareness mode may be correlated with the microtubules processing, while the cognitive consciousness mode may be correlated with the regular connections between neurons. Looks like the microtubules communicate through a wifi system³⁴, and they process the information of a higher speed than the neurons (see Orch-or theory³⁵). The witnessing experience is described by individuals as being in present, here-now, and the reaction time and processing is described as being more speedy than during the cognitive consciousness experience.

#2 DMT, microtubules and pure awareness.

It may be that the DMT is enhancing the resonance-induced conductance in single microtubules, a process that would be inhibited by anesthetic gases³⁶. Although there is no assay to measure endogenous production of DMT, it seems that 5-methoxy-DMT is likely to produce witnessing awareness experiences. Is it possible that the witnessing awareness mode have a physiological correlate in the production of endogenous DMT?³⁷

#3 Autism and the witnessing awareness mode

It may be that the individuals with autism are born with an increased ability to enter the witnessing consciousness mode, leading to an inability to develop the cognitive consciousness experience in the regular educational system? There are many adults with autism that show extraordinary abilities, related to memory and perception of here-now experiences (these are characteristics of the witnessing awareness mode). A study realized by Patricia Howlin of King's College, London, suggests that as many as 30% of autistic people have some sort of savant-like capability in areas such as calculation or music.³⁸

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³³ Warren, J. (2007). *The head trip: Adventures on the wheel of consciousness*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, p. 304

³⁴ Sahu, S., Ghosh, S., Ghosh, B., Aswani, K., Hirata, K., Fujita, D., & Bandyopadhyay, A. (2013). Atomic Water Channel Controlling Remarkable Properties of a Single Brain Microtubule: Correlating Single Protein to its Supramolecular Assembly. *Biosensors and Bioelectronics*, 47, 141–148

³⁵ Hameroff, S. (2010). *Clarifying the Tubulin bit/qubit - Defending the Penrose-Hameroff Orch OR Model* (Quantum Biology). Retrieved May 10, 2013, from transcriptvids.com/v/LXFFbxoHp3s.html

³⁶ Stuart Hameroff. Personal communication, April 01, 2013

³⁷ Acknowledgements to Rick Strassman and D. Beach Barrett

³⁸ Autism and extraordinary ability. Genius locus (2009). *The Economist*. Retrieved April 10, 2013 from <http://www.economist.com/node/13489714>